

# **Julian and Maddalo**

**A Conversation**

Percy Bysshe Shelley

1824

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## PREFACE.

The meadows with fresh streams, the bees with thyme,  
The goats with the green leaves of budding Spring,  
Are saturated not--nor Love with tears.--VIRGIL'S "Gallus".

Count Maddalo is a Venetian nobleman of ancient family and of great fortune, who, without mixing much in the society of his countrymen, resides chiefly at his magnificent palace in that city. He is a person of the most consummate genius, and capable, if he would direct his energies to such an end, of becoming the redeemer of his degraded country. But it is his weakness to be proud: he derives, from a comparison of his own extraordinary mind with the dwarfish intellects that surround him, an intense apprehension of the nothingness of human life. His passions and his powers are incomparably greater than those of other men; and, instead of the latter having been employed in curbing the former, they have mutually lent each other strength. His ambition preys upon itself, for want of objects which it can consider worthy of exertion. I say that Maddalo is proud, because I can find no other word to express the concentrated and impatient feelings which consume him; but it is on his own hopes and affections only that he seems to trample, for in social life no human being can be more gentle, patient and unassuming than Maddalo. He is cheerful, frank and witty. His more serious conversation is a sort of intoxication; men are held by it as by a spell. He has travelled much; and there is an inexpressible charm in his relation of his adventures in different countries.

Julian is an Englishman of good family, passionately attached to those philosophical notions which assert the power of man over his own mind, and the immense improvements of which, by the extinction of certain moral superstitions, human society may be yet susceptible. Without concealing the evil in the world he is for ever speculating how good may be made superior. He is a complete infidel, and a scoffer at all things reputed holy; and Maddalo takes a wicked pleasure in drawing out his taunts against religion. What Maddalo thinks on these matters is not exactly known. Julian, in spite of his heterodox opinions, is conjectured by his friends to possess some good qualities. How far this is possible the pious reader will determine. Julian is rather serious.

Of the Maniac I can give no information. He seems, by his own account, to have been disappointed in love. He was evidently a very cultivated and amiable person when in his right senses. His story, told at length, might be like many other stories of the same kind: the unconnected exclamations of his agony will perhaps be found a sufficient comment for the text of every heart.

## A CONVERSATION.

I rode one evening with Count Maddalo  
Upon the bank of land which breaks the flow  
Of Adria towards Venice: a bare strand  
Of hillocks, heaped from ever-shifting sand,  
Matted with thistles and amphibious weeds,  
Such as from earth's embrace the salt ooze breeds,  
Is this; an uninhabited sea-side,  
Which the lone fisher, when his nets are dried,  
Abandons; and no other object breaks  
The waste, but one dwarf tree and some few stakes  
Broken and unrepaired, and the tide makes  
A narrow space of level sand thereon,  
Where 'twas our wont to ride while day went down.  
This ride was my delight. I love all waste  
And solitary places; where we taste  
The pleasure of believing what we see  
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be:  
And such was this wide ocean, and this shore  
More barren than its billows; and yet more  
Than all, with a remembered friend I love  
To ride as then I rode;--for the winds drove  
The living spray along the sunny air  
Into our faces; the blue heavens were bare,  
Stripped to their depths by the awakening north;  
And, from the waves, sound like delight broke forth  
Harmonising with solitude, and sent  
Into our hearts aerial merriment.  
So, as we rode, we talked; and the swift thought,  
Winging itself with laughter, lingered not,  
But flew from brain to brain,--such glee was ours,  
Charged with light memories of remembered hours,  
None slow enough for sadness: till we came  
Homeward, which always makes the spirit tame.  
This day had been cheerful but cold, and now  
The sun was sinking, and the wind also.  
Our talk grew somewhat serious, as may be  
Talk interrupted with such raillery  
As mocks itself, because it cannot scorn  
The thoughts it would extinguish: --'twas forlorn,  
Yet pleasing, such as once, so poets tell,  
The devils held within the dales of Hell  
Concerning God, freewill and destiny:  
Of all that earth has been or yet may be,  
All that vain men imagine or believe,  
Or hope can paint or suffering may achieve, 4  
We descanted; and I (for ever still  
Is it not wise to make the best of ill?)  
Argued against despondency, but pride  
Made my companion take the darker side.  
The sense that he was greater than his kind  
Had struck, methinks, his eagle spirit blind  
By gazing on its own exceeding light.

'Month after month,' he cried, 'to bear this load  
And as a jade urged by the whip and goad  
To drag life on, which like a heavy chain  
Lengthens behind with many a link of pain!--  
And not to speak my grief--O, not to dare  
To give a human voice to my despair,  
But live, and move, and, wretched thing! smile on  
As if I never went aside to groan,  
And wear this mask of falsehood even to those  
Who are most dear--not for my own repose--  
Alas! no scorn or pain or hate could be  
So heavy as that falsehood is to me--  
But that I cannot bear more altered faces  
Than needs must be, more changed and cold embraces,  
More misery, disappointment, and mistrust  
To own me for their father...Would the dust  
Were covered in upon my body now!  
That the life ceased to toil within my brow!  
And then these thoughts would at the least be fled;  
Let us not fear such pain can vex the dead.

'What Power delights to torture us? I know  
That to myself I do not wholly owe  
What now I suffer, though in part I may.  
Alas! none strewed sweet flowers upon the way  
Where wandering heedlessly, I met pale Pain  
My shadow, which will leave me not again--  
If I have erred, there was no joy in error,  
But pain and insult and unrest and terror;  
I have not as some do, bought penitence  
With pleasure, and a dark yet sweet offence,  
For then,--if love and tenderness and truth  
Had overlived hope's momentary youth,  
My creed should have redeemed me from repenting;  
But loathed scorn and outrage unrelenting  
Met love excited by far other seeming  
Until the end was gained...as one from dreaming  
Of sweetest peace, I woke, and found my state  
Such as it is.--

'O Thou, my spirit's mate  
Who, for thou art compassionate and wise,  
Wouldst pity me from thy most gentle eyes  
If this sad writing thou shouldst ever see--  
My secret groans must be unheard by thee,  
Thou wouldst weep tears bitter as blood to know  
Thy lost friend's incommunicable woe.

'Ye few by whom my nature has been weighed  
In friendship, let me not that name degrade  
By placing on your hearts the secret load  
Which crushes mine to dust. There is one road  
To peace and that is truth, which follow ye!  
Love sometimes leads astray to misery.  
Yet think not though subdued--and I may well  
Say that I am subdued--that the full Hell  
Within me would infect the untainted breast  
Of sacred nature with its own unrest;  
As some perverted beings think to find  
In scorn or hate a medicine for the mind  
Which scorn or hate have wounded--O how vain!  
The dagger heals not but may rend again...  
Believe that I am ever still the same  
In creed as in resolve, and what may tame  
My heart, must leave the understanding free,  
Or all would sink in this keen agony--  
Nor dream that I will join the vulgar cry;  
Or with my silence sanction tyranny;  
Or seek a moment's shelter from my pain  
In any madness which the world calls gain,  
Ambition or revenge or thoughts as stern  
As those which make me what I am; or turn  
To avarice or misanthropy or lust...  
Heap on me soon, O grave, thy welcome dust!  
Till then the dungeon may demand its prey,  
And Poverty and Shame may meet and say--  
Halting beside me on the public way--  
"That love-devoted youth is ours--let's sit  
Beside him--he may live some six months yet."  
Or the red scaffold, as our country bends,  
May ask some willing victim; or ye friends  
May fall under some sorrow which this heart  
Or hand may share or vanquish or avert;  
I am prepared--in truth, with no proud joy--  
To do or suffer aught, as when a boy  
I did devote to justice and to love  
My nature, worthless now!...  
'I must remove  
A veil from my pent mind. 'Tis torn aside!  
O, pallid as Death's dedicated bride,  
Thou mockery which art sitting by my side,  
Am I not wan like thee? at the grave's call  
I haste, invited to thy wedding-ball  
To greet the ghastly paramour, for whom  
Thou hast deserted me...and made the tomb 6  
Thy bridal bed...But I beside your feet  
Will lie and watch ye from my winding-sheet--  
Thus...wide awake tho' dead...yet stay, O stay!  
Go not so soon--I know not what I say--  
Hear but my reasons...I am mad, I fear,  
My fancy is o'erwrought...thou art not here...  
Pale art thou, 'tis most true, but thou art gone

'How vain

Are words! I thought never to speak again,  
Not even in secret,--not to mine own heart--  
But from my lips the unwilling accents start,  
And from my pen the words flow as I write,  
Dazzling my eyes with scalding tears...my sight  
Is dim to see that charactered in vain  
On this unfeeling leaf which burns the brain  
And eats into it...blotting all things fair  
And wise and good which time had written there.

'Those who inflict must suffer, for they see  
The work of their own hearts, and this must be  
Our chastisement or recompense--O child!  
I would that thine were like to be more mild  
For both our wretched sakes...for thine the most  
Who feelest already all that thou hast lost  
Without the power to wish it thine again;  
And as slow years pass, a funereal train  
Each with the ghost of some lost hope or friend  
Following it like its shadow, wilt thou bend  
No thought on my dead memory?

...

'Alas, love!  
Fear me not...against thee I would not move  
A finger in despite. Do I not live  
That thou mayst have less bitter cause to grieve?  
I give thee tears for scorn and love for hate;  
And that thy lot may be less desolate  
Than his on whom thou tramplest, I refrain  
From that sweet sleep which medicines all pain.  
Then, when thou speakest of me, never say  
"He could forgive not." Here I cast away  
All human passions, all revenge, all pride;  
I think, speak, act no ill; I do but hide  
Under these words, like embers, every spark  
Of that which has consumed me--quick and dark  
The grave is yawning...as its roof shall cover  
My limbs with dust and worms under and over  
So let Oblivion hide this grief...the air  
Closes upon my accents, as despair  
Upon my heart--let death upon despair!

He ceased, and overcome leant back awhile,  
Then rising, with a melancholy smile  
Went to a sofa, and lay down, and slept  
A heavy sleep, and in his dreams he wept  
And muttered some familiar name, and we  
Wept without shame in his society.  
I think I never was impressed so much;  
The man who were not, must have lacked a touch  
Of human nature...then we lingered not,  
Although our argument was quite forgot,  
But calling the attendants, went to dine  
At Maddalo's; yet neither cheer nor wine  
Could give us spirits, for we talked of him  
And nothing else, till daylight made stars dim;  
And we agreed his was some dreadful ill  
Wrought on him boldly, yet unspeakable,  
By a dear friend; some deadly change in love  
Of one vowed deeply which he dreamed not of;  
For whose sake he, it seemed, had fixed a blot  
Of falsehood on his mind which flourished not  
But in the light of all-beholding truth;  
And having stamped this canker on his youth  
She had abandoned him--and how much more  
Might be his woe, we guessed not--he had store  
Of friends and fortune once, as we could guess  
From his nice habits and his gentleness;  
These were now lost...it were a grief indeed  
If he had changed one unsustaining reed  
For all that such a man might else adorn.  
The colours of his mind seemed yet unworn;  
For the wild language of his grief was high,  
Such as in measure were called poetry;  
And I remember one remark which then  
Maddalo made. He said: 'Most wretched men  
Are cradled into poetry by wrong,  
They learn in suffering what they teach in song.'



If I had been an unconnected man,  
I, from this moment, should have formed some plan  
Never to leave sweet Venice,--for to me  
It was delight to ride by the lone sea;  
And then, the town is silent--one may write  
Or read in gondolas by day or night,  
Having the little brazen lamp alight,  
Unseen, uninterrupted; books are there,  
Pictures, and casts from all those statues fair  
Which were twin-born with poetry, and all  
We seek in towns, with little to recall  
Regrets for the green country. I might sit  
In Maddalo's great palace, and his wit  
And subtle talk would cheer the winter night  
And make me know myself, and the firelight  
Would flash upon our faces, till the day  
Might dawn and make me wonder at my stay:  
But I had friends in London too: the chief  
Attraction here, was that I sought relief  
From the deep tenderness that maniac wrought  
Within me--'twas perhaps an idle thought--  
But I imagined that if day by day  
I watched him, and but seldom went away,  
And studied all the beatings of his heart  
With zeal, as men study some stubborn art  
For their own good, and could by patience find  
An entrance to the caverns of his mind,  
I might reclaim him from this dark estate:  
In friendships I had been most fortunate--  
Yet never saw I one whom I would call  
More willingly my friend; and this was all  
Accomplished not; such dreams of baseless good  
Oft come and go in crowds or solitude  
And leave no trace--but what I now designed  
Made for long years impression on my mind.  
The following morning, urged by my affairs,  
I left bright Venice.

After many years  
And many changes I returned; the name  
Of Venice, and its aspect, was the same;  
But Maddalo was travelling far away  
Among the mountains of Armenia.  
His dog was dead. His child had now become  
A woman; such as it has been my doom  
To meet with few,--a wonder of this earth,  
Where there is little of transcendent worth,  
Like one of Shakespeare's women: kindly she, 9  
And, with a manner beyond courtesy,  
Received her father's friend; and when I asked  
Of the lorn maniac, she her memory tasked,  
And told as she had heard the mournful tale:  
'That the poor sufferer's health began to fail  
Two years from my departure, but that then  
The lady who had left him, came again

## CANCELLED FRAGMENTS OF JULIAN AND MADDALO.

'What think you the dead are?' 'Why, dust and clay,  
What should they be?' 'Tis the last hour of day.  
Look on the west, how beautiful it is  
Vaulted with radiant vapours! The deep bliss  
Of that unutterable light has made  
The edges of that cloud ... fade  
Into a hue, like some harmonious thought,  
Wasting itself on that which it had wrought,  
Till it dies ... and ... between  
The light hues of the tender, pure, serene,  
And infinite tranquillity of heaven.  
Ay, beautiful! but when not..'

...

'Perhaps the only comfort which remains  
Is the unheeded clanking of my chains,  
The which I make, and call it melody.'

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[Composed at Este after Shelley's first visit to Venice, 1818 (Autumn); first published in the "Posthumous Poems", London, 1824 (edition Mrs. Shelley). Shelley's original intention had been to print the poem in Leigh Hunt's "Examiner"; but he changed his mind and, on August 15, 1819, sent the manuscript to Hunt to be published anonymously by Ollier. This manuscript, found by Mr. Townshend Mayer, and by him placed in the hands of Mr. H. Buxton Forman, C.B., is described at length in Mr. Forman's Library Edition of the poems (volume 3 page 107). The date, 'May, 1819,' affixed to "Julian and Maddalo" in the "Posthumous Poems", 1824, indicates the time when the text was finally revised by Shelley. Sources of the text are (1) "Posthumous Poems", 1824; (2) the Hunt manuscript; (3) a fair draft of the poem amongst the Boscombe manuscripts; (4) "Poetical Works", 1839, 1st and 2nd editions (Mrs. Shelley). Our text is that of the Hunt manuscript, as printed in Forman's Library Edition of the Poems, 1876, volume 3, pages 103-30; variants of 1824 are indicated in the footnotes; questions of punctuation are dealt with in the notes at the end of the volume.]

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